Benedictine University recently combined two student support offices into the new Academic and Career Enrichment Center (ACE) and created the Center for Experiential Learning (BenXL) to better serve students and help them succeed in their studies and the professional world.

**Student success is a key element at BenU, and as the world of education and careers change, so must the University. Several improvements to student learning have been put in place so we can further help students succeed at school and in their careers.**

During the summer, the Student Success Center and the Career Development Center became ACE as part of a more concentrated effort to help students make better decisions about major fields of study and future career opportunities. ACE acts as a clearinghouse where students can go for a variety of resources from academic tutoring and studies skills workshops to resume, job search and interviewing strategies.

ACE is housed on the second floor of Goodwin Hall and is strategically located near the Starbucks café, where a great number of students are known to congregate. It is joined by other critical student resources like the Advising Center (where students first meet their academic advisors and chart academic goals) and BenXL.

“Students don’t always reach out to us, and that means we have to be in front of them,” said Julie Cosimo, Ed.D., ACE director. “Being together in Goodwin Hall will help us meet students’ needs and increase their success.”

In addition to writing and math learning specialists, ACE will provide a new dedicated science learning specialist to assist students facing difficulties in some of the more challenging courses offered through the College of Science. Another learning specialist will help monitor students who are at risk of failing and will reach out to them to ascertain whether they need other services, such as tutoring or help with test-taking and note-taking skills, or if they need to reconsider a major.
ACE and Information Technology staff will strive to provide enhanced support tailored to online and traditional students who have competing priorities.

“Eighty-five percent of our students work while going to Benedictine,” Cosimo said. “So they are going to classes and then they are running to their jobs. They don’t always have the time to personally meet with a learning specialist for help. Providing better online services is one of the things we are really going to be focusing on.”

ACE plans to develop two new courses. One would help undecided freshmen and sophomores learn more about their personal values, goals and interests, and decide on a major best suited to their skills and personalities. A second course offered to juniors and seniors will focus on developing quality job-search campaigns.

As the University continues to expand hands-on learning experiences, it will rely on BenXL to help students locate and obtain more of the kinds of experiences that employers are seeking from college graduates.

The new center will be charged with organizing a searchable database of every hands-on learning opportunity offered through the University. Once complete, students together with their advisors will be able to better plan, evaluate and apply for a wide range of experiences, such as internships, service learning or study abroad experiences, student-faculty research and register for courses with real-world applicable activities, such as creating marketing plans for local businesses or serving as an elected official in an Illinois government simulation.

Starting this fall, experiential learning will become a requirement for freshman students so that by the end of their senior year they will have taken at least one experiential learning course, according to María de la Cámara, Ph.D., provost and vice president for Academic Affairs.

“Our hope is students will not restrict themselves to that requirement — that they will continue to do more,” de la Cámara said. “We know the more experiences a student can have during their years here, the better their outlook is for a successful professional and personal life afterward.”
As a student at BenU, Nayeli Vazquez didn’t hold anything back.

When an advisor pointed out that she could earn a second degree with a little extra coursework, she jumped at the chance.

When the opportunity arose to study abroad — not once, but on three separate occasions — she went for it.

And when Vazquez walked across the Commencement stage this past May, she became the first person in her family to graduate from college.

“My mom is very proud,” Vazquez said. “She cries tears of happiness because I have done so much at such a young age. It is a very touching subject because my mom worked so hard for me, and I took advantage of everything that was offered to me. I took it to the next level.”

Vazquez’s experiences both at Benedictine and abroad inspired more students to expand their horizons and arrange their own trips, according to Marc Davidson, assistant director of International and Study Abroad Services at Benedictine.

“At age 11, Vazquez moved from Mexico to suburban Glenview. Speaking only Spanish at the time, she not only had to learn how to speak and write English, she had to learn how to understand all of the other subjects — mathematics, social studies, science, history — in a new language.

It was a daunting transition, but she managed to bond with another student in a similar predicament.

“The first friend I made was from South Korea,” Vazquez said. “I didn’t know any English — only the basics — and she didn’t know any English, so we didn’t really know how to communicate but we somehow made it work. She made me Korean food, I made her Mexican food, and we both shared our cultures.”

The friendship grew into a desire to visit South Korea. While in high school, Vasquez went on a campus tour of Benedictine and was not only impressed with the level of attentiveness and support she received from the staff, she was excited to learn about the University’s partnership with Kyung Hee University in Seoul, South Korea.

“When I found out Benedictine had a partner university there, the first thing I did was stop by the Office of International Programs and Services (IPS) and tell them I wanted to go there,” Vazquez said. “Benedictine was filled with everything I was looking for. It had the perfect location and school size to afford me the experience I wanted. I could see myself here for four years.”
Vazquez worked at the University as a tour guide for high school and transfer students making college visits, was a member of the cheerleading team, the Intercultural Club and involved in the Intercultural House, a special residence hall where students are randomly assigned and encouraged to interact with a roommate with contrasting life experiences.

During her freshman year, she changed her major from Computer Science to International Business and Economics, which requires students to study abroad during their junior year. Vazquez decided to go on a three-week, faculty-led trip to China.

“That was one of the best learning experiences,” Vazquez said. “Everyone was so excited that we were in this amazing place of history. That trip triggered my interest in study abroad, and I started going more and more.”

The following semester, Vazquez made plans to study Business at Kyung Hee University. Because of the partnership with Benedictine, Vazquez only paid a regular semester’s tuition. She also applied for financial assistance through the University’s Scholarship Tracking and Review System (STARS) and found airfare deals to make the trip even more affordable.

“That’s how I paid for all my study abroad trips,” Vazquez said. “I had to pay for my flight out of pocket and I brought along spending money for a couple little things and other travel arrangements. Eating out is really cheap over there, too. You can have a great meal for $2 to $3 and I never had to cook.”

In South Korea, she studied Global Human Resource Management, International Organization Politics, Korean Society, Korean Culture and World Heritage: South Korea. On weekends, she went on other educational adventures, including a trip to Japan and a Buddhist temple where she was able to live like a monk, engaging in several activities designed to harness spiritual concentration and meditation.

On another occasion, she took a guided tour of the Demilitarized Zone dividing North and South Korea, which included the Joint Security Area where the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed to bring a cease-fire to the Korean War. She also visited a divided conference area and table where diplomatic talks between the two countries are held.

When she returned to Benedictine for her senior year, an advisor noticed she had satisfied so many credit hours through the Spanish minor, she only needed a few more to earn a second major in Spanish.

“She suggested that I complete the Spanish major overseas and graduate with two majors instead of one,” Vazquez said. “I didn’t think twice. Being in Spain was a little less challenging because I spoke the language, but I definitely learned a whole lot more about my own culture.”

While in Spain, she studied Anthropology, History in Art, Spanish Language, International Relations and Spanish Literature. Outside of class, Vazquez visited the Royal Palace of Madrid and attended a bullfight. She spent Christmas in Germany, visited Morocco for a week and made other trips to Paris, London, Denmark and Sweden, making lasting friendships along the way with other students from all over the world.

“My network has expanded so much. I can’t wait to go back and visit them or have them come here and visit me,” Vazquez said.

“For me to be able to go to all these countries and bring my mother something from Korea or something from Spain, it has meant so much to her,” she added. “It makes me feel very proud because I know I wanted to visit these countries, but I didn’t expect to be able to visit them at this age as a first-generation college student.”
Grant Supports Summer Internships Focusing on STEM Education

Benedictine University is assisting more than a dozen students with paid summer internships as part of a two-fold plan to introduce them to the teaching profession and further develop marketable career skills.

The initiative is part of a greater focus within the College of Science’s Benedictine Educating STEM Teachers program to encourage more students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields to consider teaching as a profession. The program is supported by a $1.2 million Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship Grant awarded by the National Science Foundation.

“We are hoping through these experiences that students will consider a career in teaching, but it is more pragmatic than that,” said Allison Wilson, Ph.D., professor of Biological Sciences at BenU. “It’s more about seeing how nontraditional classroom education occurs, which may lead students to be more willing to practice teaching in terms of volunteer work.”

Since it was awarded in 2012, the grant has assisted dozens of undergraduate students and adult career-changers with stipends for teaching in high-needs schools after they graduate. It has also been used to expose incoming freshman and transfer students to the teaching field through the University’s Learning Assistant program and an Exploring Careers in Science course. The new summer internship positions were created through existing partnerships with Brookfield Zoo, the DuPage County Forest Preserve and the Morton Arboretum.

“All of them are unique to this program,” Wilson said. “Our partners went to their staffs and said ‘What do you need? How do you need extra help?’”

At Brookfield Zoo, students are serving as senior roving naturalists, engaging guests to the zoo with information and close-up animal encounters with arachnids, crustaceans and insects, as well as reptiles, amphibians, fish and a variety of other domestic and exotic animals. The internship includes a week-long certified interpretive guide training program.

Through the DuPage County Forest Preserve, a student intern is helping to plan and lead lessons as a science camp assistant at the Fullersburg Woods Nature Education Center in Oak Brook. Another is working as a naturalist assistant at the Willowbrook Wildlife Center presenting “Critter Chats,” which provide visitors with nature discovery discussions and activities. The student will also design an exhibit guide for the center and take inventory of animal artifacts. A third student is interning as a science program assistant, helping the forest preserve’s district headquarters develop and deliver engaging science programs.

At the Morton Arboretum, students are assisting science camp instructors in nature discovery classes and other outdoor education activities; designing a self-guided experience for visitors to the arboretum; conducting research on nature play spaces and their impact on early childhood education; creating a website to capture research and evaluations of different projects for arboretum staff; planning, writing and producing scripts for guided walks or tram tours, special events or labels for collections, gardens and natural areas; and developing content for adult education classes.

The University also offers summer internships through the Jurica-Suchy Nature Museum where students organize and prepare educational kits filled with natural history specimens and activities (called Discovery Boxes) and lead lessons for children attending Summer Fun Day Camp.

“The internship I had working with children at the Jurica-Suchy Nature Museum was such an engaging experience. It gave me a lot of experience working through and explaining key topics pertaining to the natural sciences,” said Elementary Education major Samia Quadri.

“Through all of the responsibilities I had, I was able to learn and gain a lot of experience that I will need as a future educator.”

At the end of the internships, students may give presentations at different forums such as the Undergraduate Research, Scholarships and Arts Symposium. This all provides a great experience for our students and gives them an advantage in their career field. A second round of summer internships is planned for 2017.
ALUMNUS STARS IN BIGGEST ROLE OF HIS LIFE

As a student-athlete at Benedictine University, some of Joe Coots’ biggest performances occurred on Saturdays while playing football.

Today, they come in the form of acting roles on popular commercials, TV shows, movies and Broadway musicals.

This past fall, the Winnebago, Ill., native starred in his biggest role to date as a lead character in the first national tour of “Kinky Boots,” the Cyndi Lauper musical that has won six Tony Awards including Best Musical, Best Score and Best Choreography. Coots performed in 463 renditions of the production in cities all over the United States, Canada and Australia.

“It was a wonderful experience,” Coots said. “It was the biggest thing I’ve done in my career and the biggest thing I’ve done in my life.”

Don is a pivotal character because he epitomizes people who have difficulties embracing something new or different.

“It’s a beautiful story about inclusion and accepting people for who they are,” Coots said.

Coots’ foray into acting was by no means traditional. He caught the acting bug after graduating from Benedictine while working as an advancement officer and football coach at the University. A co-worker began staging plays at Benedictine and encouraged Coots to participate.

After Benedictine, Coots worked in development and marketing at the college level. In 2005, he quit his job and moved to New York City to pursue a career in acting. He landed his first big break with the national tour of the musical “The Full Monty.”

Today, he resides in Los Angeles.

In addition to his work on “Kinky Boots,” Coots has appeared in “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit,” “Nurse Jackie,” “30 Rock,” “Bones,” “Royal Pains,” Blue Bloods,” “Castle,” “Person of Interest,” the series finale of “Rescue Me,” and several episodes of Comedy Central’s “Inside Amy Schumer.”

Know a BenU alumnus who has an interesting or inspirational career? Share the information with us. Email lhale@ben.edu.
CHECK OUT OUR UPCOMING EVENTS

The Temptations
Saturday, October 15 @ 7:30 p.m.
Lisle Main Campus
Purchase tickets at: ben.edu/benbash

Presidential Election Series
Keynote Speaker: Juan Williams, Fox News contributor and best-selling author
Tuesday, October 18 @ 7:00 p.m.
Goodwin Hall Auditorium
ben.edu/williams
This event is free and open to the public.

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Benedictine University is located in Lisle, Illinois, just 25 miles west of Chicago, and has branch campuses in Springfield, Illinois, and Mesa, Arizona. Founded as a Catholic university in 1887, Benedictine enrolls nearly 10,000 students in 56 undergraduate and 19 graduate programs. Forbes magazine named Benedictine among "America's Top Colleges" for the fifth consecutive year in 2015. A 2016 PayScale Inc. report ranked BenU one of the top 10 colleges in Illinois for return on investment and in the top 20 percent nationally. Accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (hlcommission.org). For more information, contact (630) 829-6300, admissions@ben.edu or visit ben.edu.

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